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ABSTRACT

Although student populations of public schools are becoming increasingly diverse, the teacher population has remained relatively homogeneous, and many teachers do not have sufficient knowledge of or experience with other cultural groups to deal with differences in the classroom. Gay men and lesbians comprise one such cultural group. A survey of 42 prospective teachers enrolled in the Human Diversity in Education course at Kent (Ohio) State University measured general attitudes toward homosexuality, knowledge, educator-specific attitudes, and anticipated educator behavior. The prospective teachers identified themselves as being "predominantly heterosexual." Results indicated that the group held slightly homophobic general attitudes and educator-specific attitudes. The group also exhibited a general lack of knowledge about homosexuality. The high percentages of incorrect responses on items alluding to stereotypes regarding gay men and lesbians suggest that misinformation is prevalent. The group also exhibited unwillingness to address gay and lesbian issues adequately in the context of school or to behave in ways that are supportive to gays and lesbians. Carefully planned and implemented formal instruction may be helpful in changing negative attitudes toward diversity in sexual orientation. Successful interventions may take a cognitive approach, an affective approach, or some combination of the two. (Contains 56 references.) (JDD)

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# PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES, AND BEHAVIOR REGARDING GAY MEN AND LESBIANS

## Introduction

The challenge of recognizing and valuing diversity has become a major issue in our society. In particular, institutions of higher education have been called upon to recognize that a university is comprised of many different communities that must be woven together in order to meet the needs of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. According to Wright (1987), the diverse constituencies represented include, but are not limited to, older students (over 28), students of color, part-time students, poor students, differently abled students, gay and lesbian students, international students, and first-generation college attenders. Yet, to have representation of diverse cultures is insufficient. As Moses (1990) suggests, it is necessary to apply

> the model of cultural pluralism in which diversity is valued to structure the university in a way that facilitates cross-cultural learning among the many segments of the university...(p. 403).

The challenge for higher education is to broaden intellectual perspectives and to question the assumptions and expression of bigotry (Fischler, 1992) so that differences can be seen as alternative visions (resources for learning). The challenge for teacher educators is to prepare future teachers to effectively deal with the increasing diversity of students. Espin (1993) notes,

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> In reality, human variability is the norm, and each group's experiences and perspectives are nothing but a part of the total human experience. To limit our definition of the 'human' to the characteristics of one group is narrow thinking and a limitation of our knowledge (p. 411).

In an increasingly pluralistic society, it is not only desirable but necessary for an individual to be able to solve problems and to question the value of traditional configurations of authority. More than ever, educators have the obligation and responsibility to provide all students equitable access to education.

Although the student populations of public schools is becoming increasingly diverse, the teacher population has remained relatively homogenous. Zimpher (1989) describes the typical teacher education student as a white middle class female, who grew up in a rural or small town, attends a school which is close to home, and has "limited geographic aspirations" for the future. Currently 88% of the K-12 teaching force is white and 68% are women (Center for Educational Statistics, 1989). Many do not have sufficient knowledge of or experience with other cultural groups to negotiate differences in the classroom. Gay men and lesbians comprise one such cultural group about which school personnel may have insufficient knowledge.

Current estimates of the number of gay men and lesbians in the United States vary considerably. The most widely quoted estimate of 10% is based on Kinsey's data (Kinsey, Pomeroy &

Martin, 1948; 1953) on sexual behavior and psychological response. The Janus Report on Sexual Behavior (Janus & Janus, 1993), the first cross-sectional national study of sexuality since Kinsey, places the estimate between three and seven percent. These estimates are based on the number of participants reporting having had "frequent" or "ongoing" homosexual experiences. In this context, 9% of the men and 5% of the women (7% total) "may be considered homosexual" (p. 70). However, only 4% of the men and 2% of the women (3% total) self-identified themselves as gay or lesbian; and 5% of the men and 3% of the women (4% total) self-identified themselves as bisexual. Even if only 3% of the American population is gay or lesbian, this represents over 7,500,000 people. In any case, it would seem likely that a teacher will encounter several gay/lesbian/bisexual colleagues, students, administrators, and parents in the course of her or his practice.

Many educators realize that homosexuality per se is not the problem, but the manifestations of homophobia and heterosexism experienced by gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are sources of conflict. However, they may not be aware of a student's or colleague's sexual orientation. Unlike gender or race, sexual orientation may not be obvious or revealed (Garnets, Hancock, Cochran, Goodchilds & Peplau, 1991).

**Homophobia and Heterosexism**

Homophobia can be described in terms of four distinct but interrelated levels: personal, interpersonal, institutional, and

cultural (Blumenfeld, 1992). Personal homophobia refers to one's belief system regarding sexual minorities (e.g. they are psychologically disturbed, immoral, and/or genetically inferior and therefore should be pitied or hated). Interpersonal homophobia "is manifested when a personal bias or prejudice affects relations among individuals, transforming prejudice into its active component - discrimination" (p. 4). Verbal and physical harassment/intimidation, name calling, joke telling, hate crimes, and discrimination in housing and employment are all examples of interpersonal homophobia. Institutional homophobia is the ways in which the institutions of government, business, education, and religion "systematically discriminate" on the basis of sexual orientation. Such discrimination is enforced by certain laws, codes, and policies. Cultural homophobia, defined by "the social norms or codes of behavior that, although not expressly written into law or policy, nonetheless work within a society to legitimize oppression" (p. 6), includes seven categories: conspiracy to silence, denial of culture, denial of popualr strength, fear or overvisibility, creation of defined public spaces, denial of self-labeling, and negative symbolism or stereotyping.

As such, homophobia shares similarities with other forms of prejudice and discrimination such as racism, antisemitism, sexism, ageism, and ableism. However, homophobia differs in that "overt discrimination and intolerance against [lesbians and gay men] often are officially condoned by governmental, religious,



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and social institutions" (Herek, 1989, p. 949). A parallel term, heterosexism, may be defined as "the belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby its right to dominance" (Lorde, 1984, p. 45).

**Homosexuality and Education**

There have been significant numbers of gay men and lesbians in education, yet they have remained relatively invisible as a cultural group (Harbeck, 1991). Fear of violence and/or harassment, accusations of child molestation, making sexual advances to students, or "recruiting" students to a lesbian or gay lifestyle may deter teachers from revealing their sexual orientation (Griffin, 1991). Gay and lesbian educators also fear the loss of their job because of a lack of legal protection.

Similarly, gay and lesbian students have been described as a hidden and silent minority (Krysiak, 1987). Given that sexual orientation may be established before birth (Bell, Weinberg & Hammersmith, 1981; Whitam & Mathy, 1986) or is developed between the ages of three and nine (Harry, 1982), there are over 30 million young people in the United States between the ages of ten and twenty, a significant number of whom may be predominantly or exclusively gay or lesbian (Deisher, 1989).

Aside from the myriad of developmental issues all adolescents face, gay and lesbian youth are at increased risk for specific problems. The most crucial issues facing gay and lesbian youth center around their membership in a hated and despised minority group - that is, from the painful experience of

being different (Hetrick & Martin, 1989). These include social isolation, rejection by family, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), suicide ideation and attempts, alcohol and other drug abuse, harassment and violence (hate crimes), and homelessness (Herek, 1989, Hetrick & Martin, 1988; 1989; Kruks, 1991).

For many gay, lesbian and bisexual youth, social isolation is the most serious problem they face. Visible role models are virtually nonexistent; and accurate information about homosexuality and bisexuality is often unavailable, even in the context of sexuality education programs (Hunter & Schaecher, 1987). Unlike other minority groups, gay, lesbian and bisexual youth often do not have the support of their families and have no chance to develop a group identity (Hetrick & Martin, 1988; 1989).

Internalizing the negative messages about homosexuality and bisexuality is probably the major contributor to suicide ideation and attempts. Gibson (1989), in the Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide, stated that gay and lesbian youth account for 30% of all teen suicide attempts. Gay and lesbian youth are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than other young people; and black gay youth are 12 times more likely to attempt suicide than their white heterosexual peers. The root of the problem is a society that discriminates against and stigmatizes homosexuals while failing to recognize that a substantial number of its youth has a gay or lesbian orientation.

The difficulties faced by gay and lesbian youth in schools are exacerbated by a significant lack of awareness of and sensitivity to the needs of gay and lesbian youth exhibited by school personnel. Sears (1991) found that some gay and lesbian youth perceive school counselors and teachers to be ill-informed and unconcerned. Detachment from students' personal concerns and social issues, reluctance to discuss the issue, and responding to racial slurs but not to homophobic slurs were identified as being characteristic of school personnel holding negative attitudes toward gay and lesbian students. As one student observed,

> Homosexuality is taboo. People just kind of go bonkers when they hear that word or find out that somebody is homosexual. Even the adults act like kids. They don't know how to handle it. I thought, "I can't trust anybody with this information." You know, teachers talk (p. 37).

However, a few students shared stories of supportive educators who had a positive impact on their lives.

Reluctance to adequately address the issue of sexual orientation in schools is due, in part, to the fact that gay men and lesbians are often not considered to comprise a particular cultural group (Marcus, 1993). That is, they are not considered to have developed unique values, attitudes, ways of knowing, and ways of living as a result of identifying themselves as gay or lesbian. Also, they are often not considered to be deserving of minority group status and are consequently denied basic civil

rights. (Bersoff & Ogden, 1991).

Webb and Sherman (1989) define culture in terms of universal aspects. That is, each culture shares a common language, family systems, customs, magic/myth/spirituality system, temporality, history, and art. In this context, there is extensive evidence to support the notion of the culture of homosexuality. For example, O'Neill and Ritter discuss gay and lesbian culture in terms of family, work, spirituality, and community; Marcus (1993) describes gay and lesbian language, symbols, customs, temporality, art, and education; Grahn (1984) and Roscoe (1988) describe gay/lesbian magic and myth; and comprehensive histories of gay and lesbian culture are provided by Cant and Hemmings (1988), Duberman (1993), Duberman, Vicinus and Chauncey (1989), Faderman (1991), Marcus (1992), and Thompson and Shilts (1994).

In response to the need for future teachers to address all aspects of diversity, many teacher education programs have incorporated multicultural curricula. According to Sleeter (1992),

> Multicultural education can be defined broadly as any set of processes by which schools work with rather than against oppressed groups (p. 141).

Kent State University's College of Education began to restructure the pre-professional core for teacher education students in 1988. In the Fall semester of 1991, the Pre-professional Education Experience Requirement (PEER) Program was offered for the first time. The PEER Program is a six credit



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block of three courses: Human Development and Learning, Human Diversity in Education, and Pre-professional Practicum. In addition, students spend six hours per week volunteering in local public schools. The PEER block is currently required of all pre-education majors. The purpose of the program is to

> provide students with an introduction to the culture of the school, including both the knowledge and practice requirements for effective interaction with a diverse population of children and adults. The term "diversity" includes differences in culture, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, health, and physical, emotional, and mental ability (College of Education, N.d., p. 11).

Although "sexual orientation" is conspicuously absent from this list, it is mentioned in the Human Diversity in Education course description:

> Human Diversity in Education takes a sociological and anthropological view of human differences, focusing on the cultural ideas, beliefs, and behavior that individuals learn as members of a variety of social groups, including ethnicity, race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, and religion (College of Education, N.d., p. 4).

The required text for the course, however, fails to address sexual orientation as a salient aspect of diversity.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to identify correlates of knowledge about, attitudes toward, and self-reported behaviors

regarding gay men and lesbians among prospective teachers enrolled in the Human Diversity in Education course.

Prospective teachers are of particular interest because when education takes place, each person involved brings her/his cultural background to the process (Pine & Hilliard, 1990). Good, Biddle and Brophy (1975) cited extensive research to support the claim that teacher attitudes not only affect student performance but student attitudes as well. It logically follows that a non-homophobic model will consciously, subconsciously, and/or unconsciously transmit those attitudes to her/his students. As Moses (1990) points out, educators must examine their own biases and prejudices before they can expect students to do so.

**Methodology**

**Students**

Of the 53 undergraduate pre-education majors enrolled in two sections of the Human Diversity in Education course, 42 participated in the study during class time. Data collection occurred on November 22, 1993 (week 13 of the semester). All students attending class that day agreed to participate. Four of the 27 students in the first section and seven of the 26 students in the second section were absent. Responses were anonymous and confidential, and participation was voluntary. The sample consisted of 29 women (69%) and 13 men (31%). Ages ranged from 19 to 42 years with a mean age of 21.2 (sd = 4.24) and a mode of 19 (42.9%). Thirty-eight (90.5%) were aged 23 or younger. There

were 28 sophomores (66.7%), 10 juniors (23.8%), two seniors (4.8%), and two others (4.8%). In terms of race, there were 38 white students (90.5%), two Black students (4.8%), and two American Indian students (4.8%). All considered themselves to be "predominantly heterosexual".

**Instrumentation**

Data were collected using a survey consisting of five sections: demographic information, a 20-item general attitude scale, an 18-item knowledge scale, an 8-item educator-specific attitude scale, and a 14-item anticipated educator behavior scale. Demographics included age, race, year in school, and sexual orientation.

Homophobia (holding negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians) was measured using Herek's (1988) Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men (ATLG) scale. The ATLG scale is a Likert-format 20 item questionnaire, consisting of ten items which refer to gay men and ten items pertaining to lesbians. A nine-point response scale is used ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (9). The scale was analyzed as a total score of 20 items. Scores on the ATLG scale range from 20 (extremely positive attitudes) to 180 (extremely negative attitudes).

Factual knowledge of homosexuality was assessed using Wells and Franken's (1987) Homosexual Information Scale (HIS). The HIS consists of 18 true/false statements based on information documented in the current literature. Scores on the HIS can

range from 0 (none correct) to 18 (all correct).

Educator-specific attitudes regarding gays and lesbians was assessed using a modified version of Sears' (1991) Professional Attitude Index (PAI). The PAI is a 14-item questionnaire designed to measure prospective teachers' attitudes and behaviors relating to homosexuality in the school. The eight items which measure attitudes comprised the Educator-specific Attitude Scale (EAS). A four-point response scale was used ranging from "strongly agree" (1) to "strongly disagree" (4). Scores on the EAS range from 8 (extremely positive attitudes) to 32 (extremely negative attitudes).

Anticipated educator behaviors (AEB) was measured using a scale comprised of the six remaining items in the PAI (which measure behaviors) combined with the eight items in Sears' (1991) checklist of prospective teachers' expected professional activities. A four-point response scale was used ranging from "strongly agree" (1) to "strongly disagree" (4). Scores on the AEB range from 14 (extremely positive behaviors) to 70 (extremely negative behaviors).

Data presented throughout Herek's (1988) paper support the reliability of the ATLG (alpha = .90). Wells and Franken (1987) reported an alpha of .79 for the HIS. This reliability analysis generated alphas of .95 for the ATLG, .52 for the HIS, .74 for the EAS, and .93 for the AEB.

**Data Analysis**

Total mean scores on the ATLG scale, the EAS, and the AEB

scale were computed for each participant. These total means were used to replace missing values in the event that the participant failed to answer a particular item. Missing responses on the HIS were treated as incorrect answers. The relationships between general attitudes, knowledge, educator-specific attitudes, and anticipated educator behaviors were analyzed using Pearson correlation.

**Results**

Scores on the ATLG ranged from 21 to 160 with a mean of 83.3 (sd = 34.46); 26.2% (11) scored 106 or higher (very negative attitudes) and 16.7% (7) scored 48 or lower (very positive attitudes).

Scores on the knowledge scale ranged from ranged from 6 (33% correct) to 17 (94%) with a mean score of 12.7 (sd = 2.68) and a mode of 13 (72% correct); 38.1 % (16) scored 12 (67% correct) or below. The most frequently missed question was: In the last 25 years there has been an increase in homosexuality; 73.8% (31) answered incorrectly. Also, percentages of incorrect responses were high for the following four items: (a) Heterosexual teachers, more often than homosexual teachers, seduce their students or sexually exploit them (50%); (b) Most homosexuals follow "masculine" or "feminine" behavior in their same-sex relationships (40.5%); (c) If the media portrays homosexuality or lesbianism as positive, this could sway youths into becoming homosexual or desiring homosexuality as a way of life (35.7%); and (d) Homosexuals are usually identifiable by their appearance

or mannerisms (42.9%).

Scores on the EAS ranged from 8 to 21 with a mean of 14.8 (sd = 3.82); 35.7% (15) scored 17 or higher (very negative attitudes); 26.2% (11) scored 12 or lower (very positive attitudes). Thirty-three percent (14) disagreed with: I would feel comfortable if a student talked with me about his or her sexual orientation; 28.6% (12) agreed with: I would feel uncomfortable if my school hired an openly gay or lesbian teacher; and 28.6% (12) disagreed with: A teacher must work in school to lessen prejudicial attitudes about homosexuality.

Scores on the AEB scale ranged from 16 to 52 with a mean of 30.1 (sd = 7.93); 59.5% (25) scored 29 or higher (negative behaviors) and 14.3% (6) scored 19 or lower (very positive behaviors). Twenty-eight percent (12) reported that they would not discuss homosexuality in the classroom; 59.5% (25) would not work in their community to bar discrimination against homosexual men and women; 23.8% (10) would not attend a school sponsored workshop on strategies in working with gay students; 33.3% (14) would not prepare educational materials for students interested in homosexuality; 40.5% (17) would not assemble a resource packet on homosexuality for teachers in the school; 26.2% (11) would not discuss concerns of gay students at a faculty meeting; 38.1% (16) would not engage in dialogue with parents about homosexuality at a school sponsored program; 30.9% (13) would not meet with homosexual adults to learn more about gay students' special needs; and 52.4% (22) would not integrate homosexual themes into

the curriculum.

Significant relationships were found between knowledge and general attitudes ($r = -.3802$, $p<.05$), knowledge and educator-specific attitudes ($r = -.4523$, $p<.01$), and knowledge and anticipated educator behaviors ($r = -.5127$, $p<.01$). The negative relationships suggest that those who have more factual knowledge about gay men and lesbians are likely to hold more positive attitudes and exhibit more positive behaviors as educators.

General attitudes were found to be significantly related to educator-specific attitudes ($r = .6845$, $p<.01$), as well as anticipated educator behaviors ($r = .6863$, $p<.01$). Not surprisingly, educator-specific attitudes and anticipated educator behaviors were highly correlated ($r = .7589$, $p<.01$).

**Summary**

This group was found to hold slightly homophobic general attitudes and educator-specific attitudes. The group mean of 12.7 (sd = 2.68) on the knowledge scale suggests a general lack of knowledge about homosexuality, given that one would expect to get nine correct by chance. Also, the high percentages of incorrect responses on items alluding to stereotypes regarding gay men and lesbians suggest that misinformation is prevalent. Despite reporting only slightly homophobic attitudes, the group mean of 30.1 (sd = 7.93) on the AEB (somewhat negative behaviors) suggests some unwillingness to adequately address gay and lesbian issues in the context of school, and/or to behave in ways which are supportive to gays and lesbians. The group shares similar

characteristics with the typical education student in terms of gender and race. However, given the sampling limitations, generalizations must be made with caution.

**Discussion**

Homophobia among prospective teachers is a concern considering how attitudes directly and indirectly affect students. Given the negative relationships between knowledge and attitudes, carefully planned and implemented formal instruction may be helpful in changing negative attitudes toward diversity in sexual orientation. There is some evidence which supports the assumption that education about gay and lesbian issues can have a positive effect on homophobic attitudes (Anderson, 1981; Butler & Byrne, 1992; Kilmann, Wanlass, Sabalis & Sullivan, 1981; Serdahely & Ziemba, 1984; Voss, 1980). To this end, successful interventions have taken a cognitive approach (Hoch, 1971), an affective approach (Pagtolun-An & Clair, 1986), or some combination of both (Rudolph, 1989; Wells, 1989).

Cognitive approaches tend to focus on knowledge acquisition and transformation whereas affective approaches focus more on feelings, attitudes, and emotions. Cognitive strategies may include lecture, discussion, review, audiovisuals, and assigned readings (Ormrod, 1990). Examples of affective strategies include speaker panels, role plays, simulations, small group discussions, case studies, debates, poetry, and photographs (Beane, 1990).

Using educational interventions about gay and lesbian issues in teacher education programs may enable future teachers to

interact more effectively with the gay and lesbian individuals they will encounter throughout their teaching career; and may help them to create an environment conducive to the intellectual and social growth of these at-risk students. Moreover, they may be more likely to attend workshops, make policy changes, and provide a more inclusive curriculum for the benefit of all students. Having a sound knowledge base may help educators respond to emotional or "moral" arguments with logic and factual information (Sobocinski, 1990).

According to Herek (1989), educators can play an important role in reducing the bigotry which underlies antigay sentiment and action. He suggests that:

> Teachers and staff should receive explicit training in sensitivity to lesbian and gay issues to prepare them to foster tolerance and reduce conflicts in their students; such training should be reflected in licensing and professional degree requirements (p. 954).

Diversity and multicultural courses in teacher education programs are appropriate contexts in which to address diversity in sexual orientation since (a) sexual orientation represents one aspect of human diversity to be accepted and celebrated (yet it is rarely mentioned as such), (b) gay men and lesbians comprise a virtually unrecognized minority cultural group, and (c) this represents a salient issue in education. Blumenfeld (1992) concludes:

> In truth, homophobia pervades the culture, and each of us,

regardless of sexual identity, risks experiencing its harmful effects...we are responsible for its elimination and... can all gain by a closer examination of the issues (p. 17).

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